

JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

DR. NICHOLAS LUCAS

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
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INTERVIEWEE: Dr. Nicholas Lucas

INTERVIEWER: Mike Petro

PETRO: This is an interview with Dr. Lucas for the Oral History Project of Joliet Junior College by Mike Petro at the location of 513 Cowels Avenue, on the fifth month 23rd date of 1973, the time seven thirty P.M.

PETRO: Well, Doctor, you can start off the interview by talking a little bit.

LUCAS: OK, I'm Dr. Lucas and I came to Illinois in 1930 from Pennsylvania--York, Pennsylvania. I went to schools in Pennsylvania--high school in York. Also, I went to Ersinus College in Collegeville, Pennsylvania between 1925 and 1929. I worked a year from 1929 to 1930, and in '30 I came out here. In 1930 I came out here and went to Chicago Medical School in Chicago. Now those days were some days. I remember when I left York. York was an industrial town and reminds me alot of Joliet. That's why I like Joliet. It happens that York was quite an industrial town; it had two or three paper mills, in fact, some of those paper mills were connected with the York plants. Of course now there aren't too many paper mills around, but at that time there were at least a half dozen. And I know from patients that I talked to later on that they were connected with this plant in York. So, I went to school in Chicago 1930 to 1935, and what I saw of Chicago at that time was something to remember. The town was really flat on its back. There was just no work for anyone in 1930, 1931,

1932, 1933. At that time I remember Madison Avenue. There wasn't anybody on Madison Avenue. Stores were boarded up. There were lines for food, lines for shoes; there were lines for everything. I remember walking on Madison Avenue and seeing these people that were living out on the street, living on these lots. The city used to turn water on for them, so they would have water and would be living in shanties. It made quite an impression on me being a small town boy, since things weren't too bad in York. It wasn't as bad as it got later. So I finished school in 1935. I interned a year in Chicago. While I was interning there, somebody told me about a fine town south of Joliet and that they needed a doctor. That's always been the war cry. They need a doctor, everybody needs a doctor. I could never understand what they meant by needing a doctor meant. But, anyway after I finished, I didn't have much money. I interned at the hospital; I was getting seven dollars a month. I had nothing at all. I started to work for a doctor in Chicago, and he paid me, I think, twelve dollars a week. I saved a little money. I took my state boards in July. In August I got my notice that I passed, and I quit this job that I had for this other doctor. I had twenty dollars, that's all I had and an old 1929 Hupmobile. It used to burn oil like mad [laughter] so I got a five-gallon can of oil from Montgomery Wards and put it in the back of this coupe. We called them coupes in those days. I hopped in and went south as far as I could. I got on old 66, down Ogden Avenue to 66, on the

way to Joliet. Old Joliet didn't look like much. There were a lot of stores that didn't look as though they were doing much. The town didn't look like a hustling community. I happened to know some of the doctors that lived in town so I talked to them. They said, "Now you better not stop in Joliet. You can't make a living in Joliet. There are too many general practitioners." I was a general practitioner. So I kept on going. I got as far as Braidwood and my money ran out. The twenty dollars was just about gone. I stopped in Braidwood. I talked to some people and they told me it would be a good town to stay in. There was an older doctor who wanted to leave so I took his place. I paid seven dollars a month rent for two rooms, and I started to practice. That was in September. I wasn't married. I came up here to Joliet then to get acquainted with the two hospitals, Silver Cross and Saint Joseph's hospitals. Now Silver Cross in 1936 was a very small place, a hole in the wall. There were four floors at the present location, and it spread west of the old site. You used to be able to get in the hospital at the time through Lome Street. It was a small place. It was the usual way hospitals were built in those days with one long row and a lot of rows coming off the hall and always a ward or two, one for women and one for men. This was in 1936. I got on the staff at Silver Cross Hospital. At the time we might have had maybe 60 doctors, and these 60 doctors were composed of maybe 55 general practitioners, who did everything, and maybe three or four specialists. The

surrounding area of Will County, even Kankakee and Grundy County, came to Silver Cross. We would take our patients in whenever we had any. In those days nobody had insurance. You had to pay your own bills. So naturally nobody wanted to go to the hospital. Most of the things you did were at home. You did 80% of your work at home. You didn't bring anyone to the hospital unless it was an extreme emergency; then you did. There would be maybe one specialist to handle it. You would hospitalize people, and they'd be taken care of by the specialist because you had too much to do. Out in the country there was no sense of driving in twenty miles a day, twenty in and twenty out, to see a patient. Then I went over to Saint Joseph's Hospital. Silver Cross was the Protestant hospital. Saint Joe's was the Catholic hospital. The hospital was on Broadway Street. It was there for years. It was about '60 or '61 when they built the new place and moved to the west end of town. Saint Joe's was a typical old-time hospital. I think there were six floors. On the fourth were the obstetrical. The first four floors were for patients in general, surgical and everything. The fourth was obstetrics, the fifth was for the babies, and the sixth floor we had surgery. In those days when I used to come to the hospital what used to aggravate me was these lift bridges, and they still have them. They talked then about having a high-rise bridge. Finally, a couple of years ago they did put a high-rise bridge in, but it is so far out that by the time you

go there and come across it's not worth it. I don't use it very much. I know they talked and talked about eliminating the bridges someday, but never done it, never come to pass and nobody ever knows why. So I practiced from 1936 to 1941 down in Braidwood using the Joliet hospitals to hospitalize patients and do most of my work. Occasionally, I made calls in town, but not too many because in those days all your doctors made house calls. It was a way of life we accepted; we didn't know any better then. The idea was that you worked midnight to midnight and thought nothing of it. Now, in those days our house calls used to be two dollars and our office calls were a dollar. The specialist used to, I think, charge two. I used to charge one. At times you didn't get it, but you didn't make a fuss about it because, like I said, that was a way of life. Nobody knew any better; that was a way of life. You were supposed to do it. If a patient had the money, they paid you, if they didn't, they didn't. You took it, and they understood and you understood. Everything would go along all right. You didn't have all the money in the world, but you were satisfied and it worked all right. Then in 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939 things were really bad. I remember when I started in Braidwood in 1936. I was talking to the supervisor in that area and he had a group of men with him. In those days there just wasn't any work, so the government put in this Work Progress Administration, the W.P.A. They were hiring men for twelve dollars a week. The men would work cleaning, oh, brushing and cleaning the

the gutters, cleaning anything, cleaning the boundary lines, cleaning anywhere that needed cleaning. There was no other work and the men had to work so the government put in this plan, the W.P.A. They hired all the men in town that could work. They would divide them all over town, burning brush that was in the road. Now, in some towns that would do it. I know in the town near us and towns that would hold still for it, they'd build streets and sidewalks for them. You paid for the cement, and they paid the labor. That way people had a chance to work. Everyone brought home a check. That was the W.P.A. Then there were other government agencies that did a lot to help the people in honor. The National Labor Board was launched. There were all kinds of initial agencies with letters like the W.P.A. Now, that must have been '36, '37, '38 that these people were working like that. I know I came out here to the supervisor and he says to me, "Doc, how are things going?" I said, "pretty bad." "Maybe one or two people can afford a buck. What can you do?" So I said, "I might ask you for a job sometime." He said, "You wouldn't." I said, "Why not? I have to eat." He didn't believe it; he didn't believe I would ask for a job. I would have, but then things began to pick up a little bit for me. I would get patients from all around. I would have to travel far. I used to care for patients all the way from Dwight. That's fifteen miles away. I used to go all the way almost to Kankakee which was twenty miles away. We used to charge fifty cents a mile. That

didn't mean, though, that you were going to get it, but that's what you charged. Then in about 1938 or 1939 work went out that there were rumors of war--rumors of war and a lot of people were coming here. I remember one fellow in Braidwood--he was a farmer and you don't think that farmers are too smart--he made a very prophetic remark. He said, "You know, there's a fellow by the name of Hitler, a German. He is going to make trouble; you watch him." The man just died about a year ago; he was 81. Isn't that something for a farmer to be able to say a fellow by the name of Hitler is going to make trouble. And when I had my office there in Braidwood I had a man next door to me who was a painter. He was Czechoslovakian, and he says to me, "You watch for Russians. The Russians," he said, "are going to beat Hitler." How did he know? That's what he said, and that's what happened. That's what did happen, and that is, of course, ten years later. Anyway, in about 1938, '39, '40 rumors were going around that the government was going to come in with an arsenal. We used to call it the powder plant down there in those days. They bought the best land around Elwood, south of Joliet. They bought the best land down there, and they started to build a series of buildings to make shells. During the war that's what they did. The government spent ten million dollars. Then the town and this area began to come out of it. Before that, in the 30's, pork chops were seven cents to nine cents a pound. You could get a hot beef sandwich for a quarter.

You could get gasoline for sixteen and seventeen cents a gallon. [laughter] I remember I bought a Chevy for six hundred dollars. It would have cost six hundred and twenty if I would have had a trunk put in it, but I didn't have the twnety dollars so I didn't get a trunk. [laughter] You wouldn't believe it would you? That's what happened. Then in 1939, '40 the arsenal began to take place. They had what they called a Elwood Ordinance Plant and a Will County Plant. The funny thing about the government is that the Wilmington Ordinance Plant was near Elwood, and the Elwood Ordinance Plant was near Wilmington. [laughter] That used to be confusing to everybody, but that's the way it had started. They hired, oh, easily about five thousand. That was during the war. Now, when they started this in 1939 and 1940 everybody in our area here was getting twenty-five and thirty cents an hour. The government came in and started to pay everyone ninety cents an hour. They got all the workers they wanted. I remember I built my house in Braidwood and paid the carpenters fifty cents an hour. [laughter] You could get a man to work for you for twenty-five cents an hour and be glad to get the job. Joliet was the same way. Joliet was not too large then. There were groups that had everything, and groups that had nothing just like every other part of the country at that time. Then when the arsenal got going good and making all this stuff, then finally we got into war in 1941. Then in 1941 the pressure was on; things looked bad, so I volunteered. I served

three and a half years, and after three and a half years I came back. Instead of going back to Braidwood, I came to Joliet and opened an office here. Here in Joliet things looked a little better. There was some building going on where there hadn't been any to speak of. Labor was getting a little higher salary. Joliet became a little bit of a boom town. Still not as much as the last five or so years here, but it became more than we had had before. Well, between when I got out of the army in 1946, oh, between 1947 and 1950 things were going not too bad. Now I remember one doctor at one of the many meetings, just to show you how little we understood what was going to happen, they were talking about raising the fees. At that time doctors were getting three dollars for a house call and still two dollars for an office call in those ten years between 1936 and 1946. So they talked about raising the fees at a medical society meeting. This one doctor says, "Look, there is going to be a depression. You better not raise your fees because you're going to have to lower them again." Now he missed it more than anybody I know because there has never been a sign of a depression. Around here there's always been a booming economy, more now than before but always more than when we first came in the late 30's. So then in 1946, '47, '48, '49, '50 things were going pretty good. The stock market was going good, and the general economy was going pretty good. Oh, there were some dips, but things were going pretty good. Then Saint Joe's Hospital decided to

to expand because over there they were it was too restricted. So they bought the land west of town and built a larger place. It has 400 patients; this is a terrific thing now. The old Silver Cross that was a hole in the wall has done the same thing; they have expanded. Then in 1946 or 1947 I moved up to Joliet. Now, at that time I will just tell you a few things about Joliet. The west side was the side of town to be in. I came in here to Joliet to buy a house for \$10,000. I had \$10,000 I had scrimped and saved all these years. So I came up to buy a house. The real estate men would not take me anywhere but on the west side, and I couldn't find a house for \$10,000 on the west side. [laughter] Now at that time when I first came here water was two dollars every three months. When they put the sewers in, they told us that if we got the sewers then we could pay off the indebtedness for the sewers by paying a little more and the bonds would be retired in ten to fifteen years. Well, this is twenty years later and we are still paying more than two dollars every three months. That just shows you what happens when there's a booming economy. You make more and you spend more. That's just the way the whole thing works. Now about the practice of medicine. I said in the beginning that there were about fifty or sixty general practitioners and three or four specialists. Well, in about 1950 we had a vote. We had some kind of squabble about procedures and who should do certain things and who shouldn't. This happens in any business, for one wants to do more than

the other. We had a little squabble at Silver Cross, so we voted. It is interesting to see that the vote went fifty-five for and fifty-five against. Fifty-five specialists and fifty-five general practitioners, that's how it's changed in the fifteen, twenty years since I came to the Joliet area. Now, of course, this is all changed. The general practitioners are just about gone. There aren't too many around, just the old timers and, of course, age has caught up with them. So what we have now is more specialists than we had when I first came here. These specialists, as far as I'm concerned, the name doesn't mean exactly what people think it means. As far as I'm concerned, they are general practitioners in one thing. One is a general practitioner in ears, nose and throat; one is a general practitioner in eyes; one is a general practitioner in hearts because they are not well rounded in everything else. They only know this one thing. That's all they do. In fact, they won't touch anything else. So to me that's not looking at the broad aspect of a human being. Just because he has a sore foot or a sore finger that doesn't mean that's all that's wrong with him. Maybe he was mad at somebody [laughter] and hit his finger and smashed it. But you can't make anybody listen to that except somebody that's been through the mill like I have, who has seen how a general practitioner works when he makes a call. When we used to make house calls, we would go into the house and he wouldn't say what's wrong. You just go into the house and find something there that would really tax your skill.

You didn't go there just to find a nose or an ear. You went there to find a person. That's the way I think the practice of medicine should be; but, of course, who is going to listen to me? [laughter] I have certain ideas about it, and that's the way I like to think that I practice medicine. That's the way I practice. You just don't do one thing and forget everything else. So Joliet has been a good town. It has been good to me. It's given me everything that I have. Of course, I worked for it; I don't think anybody gave it to me. I tell them, "You know, when they see a doctor walk by, everybody doesn't throw twenty dollar bills at me. You have to earn it. You have to prove that you can earn it. Nobody is going to give it to you. You have to work on it; you have to put out, and you have to work." That's what I have done all my life. I started working for twenty-five cents an hour when I went through college and medical school, and now I get paid a little more but to me it's still the same; I still have to work.

PETRO: OK, Doctor, I have a few simple questions here for you. Doctor, when you moved to your present address what was the area around your home like?

LUCAS: You mean right here?

PETRO: Yes, right here on Cowles Avenue.

LUCAS: Well, when we came to Cowles Avenue, when we bought this lot on Cowles Avenue in 1948, I didn't want it because it was too far out of town. I said, "It's too far out of

town," and of course, my wife said, "Yes, but the school is close; Farragut School is close." The kids were little then and we lived near Farragut. You could look out the alley and you could see Farragut. But we thought, "Up here you're just as far away, only in a different direction." That's why we bought this lot; because we thought we would build. Then in 1950 we built here. There wasn't anyone across the street from us in one direction; there wasn't anyone along side of us in another direction, and one or two houses south of us on the same side of the street. This is an older end of town, and there were houses here and there. There were a lot of open lots, but now in this area there are no open lots. The thing that we miss most in this particular area, we used to have a lot of little stores around. We could send the kids for something, but now there are no more little stores around here. We are all going in like the specialists in medicine--under one big heading, the company stores. You go there, if they are to be open certain hours. If they don't, you have to get your stuff before that because you can't go over there like you could any other time and knock on the door and say, "I'm stuck for a quart of milk," and he would give it to you. Today you can't do that. There were some garages around here, but of course, they went out of business.

PETRO: I am particularly interested in the area where my house is right now. It's been said that was swamp.

LUCAS: The house that you live in across the road from us was a swamp. It was an area of small brush. I remember I bought a quart of acid, uric acid, and I hated to keep it around the kids, who were little. I was afraid that one of them would go at it and break it and get burned. So I took it over there right where your house stands, and I buried it right where your house is now. With the kids we all went over and I dug a real deep ditch, a real deep trench, and put this bottle in there and covered it. I did it from there to the corner. There weren't any houses; or was there one? No, there wasn't. There were two on the corner. From your house to two houses away from the corner on Douglas. There were no houses on this side. There was forest over there with a lot of trees. From there up to Douglas all were trees, real big trees.

PETRO: Doctor, there's one final question I would like to ask. Doctor, in your own opinion do you feel Joliet has progressed as well as the other communities in Illinois?

LUCAS: Let me put it this way. Let me show you something. Seven miles away from Braidwood the arsenal started. The government threw ten million dollars in that area. Braidwood didn't get a thing from it, because the city administration was against everything. They didn't want anything from anybody. They wanted to work for everything. They have nothing now. They are just the same as they were thirty-five years ago when I went down there. Wilmington,

which is the next town coming toward Joliet, was in a way the same way. It was a town of about 3,00 then, and now I think it's a town of about 7,000 or 8,000--might be more. They were the same way. They were of a certain political belief. They didn't believe in taking anything from that particular administration, so they wouldn't take anything. They still are down in the scale of progress. Of course, they got more out of the arsenal building there than Braidwood did, but they didn't get too much. Then the next one would be Joliet. Joliet, I think, has taken advantage of all these things that have been built up around it. It hasn't gone as far as I think it should. Now I had occasion to go over to Kankakee. Now that town when I was over there in about 1948 or '49 had 25,000 people. I think today it has 36,000 or 38,000. Now they had a Chamber of Commerce of a thousand people. I was going to start practice there, but I didn't because I couldn't find an office. But with a thousand people in the Chamber of Commerce I thought that town would boom, but it didn't. I don't know what happened to Kankakee. I thought it was a very progressive town because the businessmen took me all around, but somehow or other everything passed it by. In Joliet I think they took advantage of all these things around them that had been springing up, and industry has come in. But I don't think as much as they could of. I don't know who you blame, the administration or who, but I think Joliet could be further ahead than it is.

PETRO: OK, well, thank you very much, Doctor. This concludes the interview with Doctor Nicholas Lucas on the project of oral history for Joliet Junior College. Thank you very much for a very enlightening discussion.

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